



Pheasants

Project Guide

4-H Motto

Learn to do by doing.

4-H Pledge

I pledge

My **head** to clearer thinking,

My **heart** to greater loyalty,

My **hands** to larger service,

My **health** to better living,

for my club, my community,

my country, and my world

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Welcome to the 4-H Alberta Pheasant Project

4-H Alberta and the Alberta Conservation Association are partnering to provide to 4-H Alberta members, the opportunity to **raise pheasants, from day old chicks to their release as 13 to 14 week old birds**. 4-H Pheasant Project members must commit to the number of pheasant chicks that they wish to raise in February, the pheasant chicks will be available in mid-May and the mature birds will be released into suitable identified habitat in August/September.

Objectives:

- To give 4-H youth a better understanding and appreciation of wildlife and the needs of wildlife;
- To help 4-H youth gain a first-hand understanding of successful husbandry and business models for raising and marketing pheasants;
- To engage 4-H youth in wildlife and their habitat;
- To encourage the retention and development of wildlife habitat, particularly on private land;
- To augment pheasant populations in Alberta.

The Alberta Conservation Association (ACA):

- will provide day old chicks, obtained from **MacFarlane's Pheasant Farm in Wisconsin USA**, to each 4-H Alberta pheasant project member accepted into the project.
 - each 4-H project member may apply to raise between 25 and 200 chicks, whatever number will best suit his/her facility and space availability.
- will identify specific release sites, requiring members to provide birds to be released into these sites
- will work with members to determine additional alternate suitable release habitat sites near the member's home location.
- will provide information and advice regarding the rearing of the pheasants throughout the duration of the program.
- **may provide** to new project members, some facility materials including:
 - Top netting for pens (approximately 15 metres x 15 metres or 50 feet x 50 foot net).
 - one waterer and one feeder.
 - peepers/blinders for birds.
- **may 'buy back'** a portion of the birds raised by each member, depending on quality of the birds and the total number of chicks raised, at a determined price per bird, for release into ACA specified areas.

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- will maintain a Facebook group entitled **ACA & 4-H Alberta Pheasant Raise and Release**. Participation in this Group Page is by invitation only. The purpose is to provide guidance to 4-H members and leaders who are currently raising chicks, and to provide an easily accessible platform to ask questions or share ideas and photos pertaining to project development. This is also a great way to discuss habitat needs, and various geographic areas, as the time approaches for releasing the birds across Alberta.

The 4-H Pheasant Project Leader will have indicated on the Pheasant Project – Request & Release Tally Sheet, all members who were agreeable to providing an email address to be invited to this group. If you were missed on that list or have changed your email address, please contact your leader so that the information can be updated.

The 4-H Branch of Alberta Agriculture and Forestry:

- will manage the overall electronic member registration working with the club leader.
- will receive the application form from each member applying to participate in the 4-H Pheasant project.
- will provide a 4-H Alberta Pheasant Project record book and project guide to each member registered in the project.
- will provide information and advice regarding the 4-H project to members, parents and leaders.
- will work with the Alberta Conservation Association to ensure that current information is provided to members, parents and leaders.

The 4-H Pheasant Project member:

Once registered in the 4-H Pheasant project on the club registration system by the club leader, **the member will receive an email containing an application form to be read and completed by the member and a parent, and submitted.**

The member will:

- **be notified if accepted** into the pheasant project once all applications have been reviewed. Space in the project may be limited;
- **commit** to the number of chicks that you wish to raise, by February 15th (this information is to be supplied to your 4-H leader in order for **one complete club order** to be submitted);
- **supply** all required feed and water for the birds from day-old chicks to 14 week old released birds;
- **provide** suitable housing in the form of a brooder house and flight pen;

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- **care** for the birds, from day-old chicks to approximately 14 weeks, when the birds will be released;
- **participate** in one or more club tours of all of the club members' pens throughout the project, and evaluate each other's birds at about 12 weeks. If only one member in the project within a club, it is recommended to contact your 4-H Specialist for the names of other clubs in the area that have members participating in the project in order to work with other members;
- **provide** photos periodically through the project to ACA and the 4-H Branch;
- **accurately count and release** the birds into specifically identified suitable habitat areas, on a date indicated, by Alberta Conservation Association. If you can provide good justification and research, some pheasants may be released at a site of your choice, following discussion and agreement with the ACA. ACA will communicate with your club leader if there are specific identified sites requiring the release of some of your birds;
- **provide accurate numbers** to your club leader, for completion of the tally sheet to be provided to 4-H Alberta and the Alberta Conservation Association.
- **complete** the 4-H Pheasant Project record book

The 4-H Alberta Pheasant Project leader:

- **will register** interested club members in the Pheasant project via the 4-H on-line system;
- **will complete a Pheasant Project – Request & Release Tally Sheet** and submit according to the instructions listed in Part A and Part B. The information on the sheet will be used by 4-H Alberta and the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) to:
 - communicate with members throughout the duration of the project;
 - place the request for pheasant chicks to be ordered for the project;
 - track the mature bird release locations; and
 - calculate the total amount due to each member from the sale of the released mature birds to be paid by the ACA.

Did you know?

****Pheasants are wild birds and never fully adapt to living around people. They are easily frightened and typically do not become completely comfortable with people or pen conditions.****

The pheasant is native to Asia and there are approximately 35 different species.

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Predator control measures are necessary throughout the project, at all stages of pheasant development. Your pheasant housing must be built, not only to keep the birds in, but to keep all predators out.

Pheasants should never be raised with poultry. Poultry carry many diseases that Pheasants are susceptible to.

Pheasant pens should be at least 100 meters (325 ft) from any wetland, dugout or water body where waterfowl (domestic or wild) may be located. Waterfowl may be carriers of infectious disease (i.e. avian influenza).

More space is better than less, as pheasants should not be overcrowded. Pheasants can be very aggressive to each other and space helps to reduce issues.

Chicks require proper bedding, heat lamps at the proper temperature, and water and feed must be available at all times.

Flight pens must provide enough room for the number of birds contained and also have cover available to promote hiding behaviour.

Pheasant Housing:

Before your chicks arrive, you need to plan and build suitable housing facilities for your Pheasants.

1. The Brooder House

A brooder house or pen is where the chicks are first housed to protect them.

Pheasant Chicks are housed here from 0-2 weeks when they are very fragile, as they can't yet regulate their body temperature. This is a very critical stage of their life.

The pheasant is a wild creature and tends to be nervous so provide ample brooder space. Pheasants tend to be very cannibalistic, so don't overcrowd them. Remember, it's better to have more space than not enough.

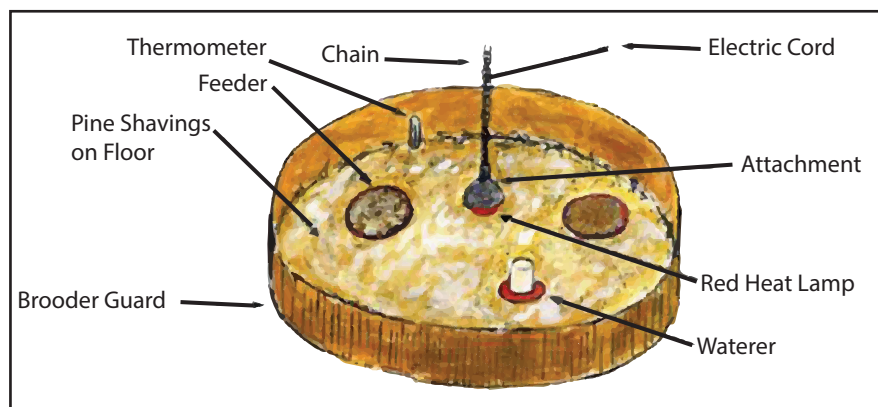
The brooder house should be weather- tight, free from drafts and rodent and predator proof. In all cases, the brooding area should allow each bird at least 0.1 square metre of floor space (3/4 of a square foot per baby pheasant). Twenty-five chicks require a space of about 1.6 metres x 1.6 metres (5.25 feet x 5.25 feet), while 50 chicks require a space of 1.6 metres x 3.2 metres (5.25 feet x 10.5 feet).

- The brooder house needs to be inside of a building: in a shed, barn, or garage for example. Whatever works!
- **Do not** use an old chicken hut unless it has been vacant for two or more seasons and **thoroughly cleaned** as pheasants are susceptible to many diseases that poultry are immune to.

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- It is recommended that you disinfect your brooder house and all equipment at least 2 weeks before your chicks arrive.
- Rounded corners (using cardboard or another pliable material) are necessary to prevent "stacking" in corners. Stacking is when the chicks climb or pile on top of each other, smothering those at the bottom.
- Use straw, chopped straw or wood chips for a bottom base. If using wood chips, these need to be thumb nail size or larger to prevent ingestion. Cover them for the first week with burlap or cloth such as muslin or brooder paper to prevent the chicks from eating them. **Do not use sand, sawdust/very fine wood or cedar chips or gravel** as the birds tend to eat them and die. **Do not use** newspaper as the chicks will not be able to get a firm footing. Remember to remove the burlap or brooder paper after the chicks are about one week old;
- Use at least one 250 Watt red-end infrared bulb heat lamp for each 100 chicks. Regular light bulbs do not provide constant heat and are not recommended;
- Have a thermometer in the pen at floor height and start with a target temperature of 37.8° C (100° F) for the first week and gradually reduce the temperature until 35° C (95° F);
- Heat lamp height is adjustable. If it is too low the birds will be on the periphery (outer edge), if it is too high they will be crowded in the middle. Make sure to get the bulb with a red end, as it won't be so bright and will help control cannibalism. Hang the heat lamp from the ceiling, about .46 meters (18 inches) from the floor to the bottom of the lamp, and adjust as necessary;
- Provide 1 one-gallon waterer for each 75 chicks. Put small rocks around base of the waterer to prevent chicks from getting stuck in it or drowning. Use a waterer with a narrow lip 1.3 centimeter (1/2 inch) or less);
- Feed can be provided on pie plates, paper plates or baking sheets, dispersed throughout pen. Use at least .6 metres (2 feet) of feeder space for each 50 chicks. The feeder should be moved once a week, and waterer twice a week to prevent diseases. (Paper plates work well as these can be replaced and discarded when soiled);

**Chick/Brooder Guard
(Inside the Brooder
House) for 0 to 6 days**



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- Use cardboard, sheet metal or another pliable material about 40-50 centimetres (14-18 inches) high formed to make a ring or circle to confine the chicks for the first 5-7 days that the chicks are in the brooder house. A circle with a diameter of 1.2 metres (4 feet) will be sufficient for 50 chicks (with the heat lamp in the center);
- The guard keeps them from straying away from the heat provided by the heat lamp and helps to cut down on the drafts on the floor. Examples of usable materials include watermelon boxes, old water tubs, unwanted child's swimming pool);
- Straw bales are not suitable as the bales may be a fire hazard if a hot heat lamp fell on them;
- As soon as the chicks can hop over the guard (usually about six days) remove the guard.



Examples of a pheasant enclosure / brooder ring for the first couple weeks.



Example of the brooder house after a couple of weeks have passed. At 4 weeks the birds can start to venture outside during the day, weather permitting. They should be housed inside the brooder house at night.



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2. Outside Pens

There are two outside pens needed - an **enclosed run** for the chicks until they are approximately six weeks old, and a larger **flight pen** for usage from then, until they are released. ***Ensure that facilities are at least 100 meters (325 feet) away from a wetland or dugout, if at all possible.***

Enclosed Run

An enclosed run should be attached to the brooder house so the young can exercise in order to grow rapidly and develop into strong, healthy birds.

- Allow young chicks to go outside around 7 to 10 days of age (weather permitting, on warm sunny days). Sunlight and a chance to dust bathe will help to develop and grow healthy feathers.
- Each chick should have approximately .3 square metres (3.25 square feet) of space until they reach approximately 6 weeks of age.
- Move the feeder and waterer, or place additional ones, into the enclosed run so that the chicks can eat and drink outside.



Make sure the grass in the enclosed run next to the brooder house is cut close to the ground. This prevents the chicks from getting lost in tall grass and makes it easier to drive the chicks back into the brooder house in the evening or when stormy weather approaches. They should be able to remain outside during the day as long as the weather is not severe (wet or cold) for the first 4 weeks but move them back inside at night and during cold or wet weather.

It is recommended that you place netting all around your pen including the roof and have posts every 3 metres (10 feet) in order to prevent pheasants escaping. Walls of all pens should consist of 2.5 centimeter (1 inch) mesh poultry netting, and be about 1.6 metres in height. The wire should be dug down at least 15 centimetres (6 inches) and run out at an angle underground to prevent predators from digging into the pen. A guard board 45 centimetres (18 inches) in height should be placed around the bottom of the perimeter of the fence to protect the chicks from drafts and prevent them from poking their heads through the wire.



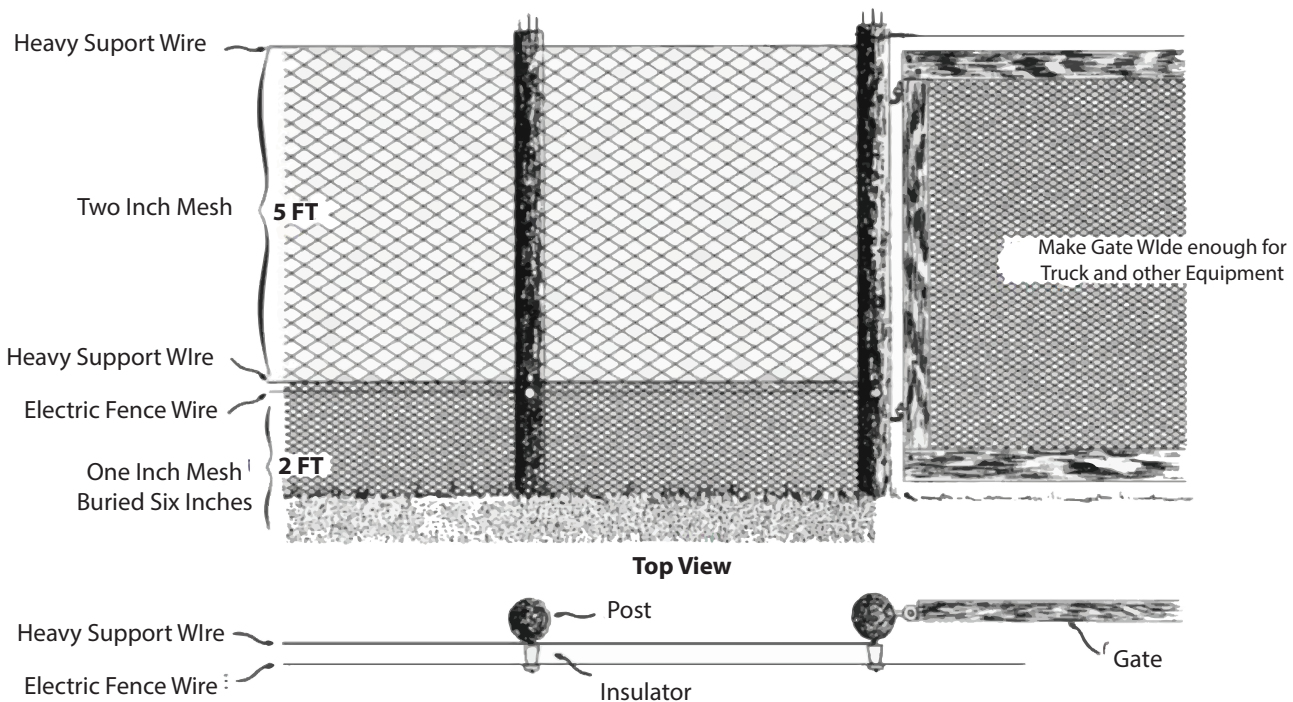
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To deter predators, place wire screen on the outside of net mesh. Ideally this should be .9 metres to 1.2 metres (3 to 4 feet high) with 15 to 25 centimetres (6 to 10 inches) buried into the ground. Bury with a right angle bend away from the base of pen.

You can also use electric fence around the outside perimeter of the enclosed run to deter predators.

Pen Construction Suggestions



The heavy support wire which is located where the two-inch mesh join is necessary to keep the fence from buckling and shorting out the electric fence wire.

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The Flight Pen – Be Creative!

Birds can start to venture out into the flight pen during the day and in good weather at as early as 4 weeks of age.

Pheasants are moved completely to the larger flight pen at 5-6 weeks of age. They should not be allowed back into the brooder house. If the birds continue to use the house, you may have a problem with feather pecking and poor development.



At 6-7 weeks the pheasant chicks are feathered enough to be moved to the outside runs.



A big yard is essential as overcrowding leads to aggression like feather picking and cannibalism. Once the birds are old enough to go into a flight pen they will need approximately 2 square meters (20 square feet) of space for each bird.

Pallets and brush can be used to give shelter from heavy rain or hail storms, provide cover and break up sightlines for the birds, which will also reduce aggression. Natural grass, canola, cereal crops and weeds such as sweet clover provide good cover. These crops should

be planted early so that cover is around 25 centimetres high (10 inches) before pheasants are put into the pens. You can cut a swath in the cover to provide the pheasants with an open area for dust bathing.



Shade should be provided either by bushes or by arranging green branches into stooks (tied bundles.) Vegetation is great for developing hiding behavior, lowering aggression, and foraging for bugs.

Each older mature bird (with peepers on) needs about 2 to 3 metres square (20 square feet to 32 square feet) as it continues to grow and develop. 25 chicks need a pen at least 5 metres x 10 metres x 1.6 metres (16 feet x 32 feet x 5 feet) while 50 pheasants need a pen 10 metres x 10 metres x 1.6 metres (32 feet x 32 feet x 5 feet).

It is important to build a strong pen in such a way that it will keep the birds in and predators out and does not have to be rebuilt in the future. Other considerations are

1. cost of the structure can vary depending on the materials that the member has available
2. long life
3. ease of construction
4. resistance to bad weather

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Usage of wire mesh fence 1.2 metres to 1.5 metres (4 – 5 feet) high attached to outside of netting, buried .15 metres – .5 metres (0.5 – 1.5 feet) into the ground at the base will discourage predators from digging under the fence.

Predators include Foxes, coyotes, skunks, raccoons, hawks, owls, crows and even house cats.



Step by Step–Taking care of your chicks–based on the experiences of members from Hays 4-H Club.



When they first arrive...

- Take them out of the boxes; dip their beaks into warm water 20°C (68° F) and put them under the heat lamp. Most losses occur because the chicks do not start to eat or drink. **Never let your chicks run out of feed or water.**

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- Adjust the height of the heat lamp so the chicks huddle in a small circle with a vacant spot directly beneath the bulb. The chicks should form a circle around the heat lamp. If the chicks bunch up directly under the heat lamp they are cold therefore lower the height of the heat lamp, and add more heat lamps and bulbs, or further draft proof your brooder house. If the chicks spread out too far away from the brooder and pant, etc., they are too hot therefore turn off one of the heat lamp bulbs, raise the height of the heat lamp and perhaps open a window during hot weather;
- The temperature at floor level should start at 37.8°C (100°F) and gradually lower 35°C (95°F) during the first week.

1 day old to 3 weeks:

- Inspect the chicks often during the first week - especially at night during the first few nights. The chicks often die from piling or stacking (from being too cold) during the first or second night;
- After the chicks are 2 or 3 weeks old it is a good idea to allow the chicks to range outside during the daytime. Wait for a warm sunny day and open the brooder house door into the pen. The pen must be covered and enclosed with one inch (hole) chicken wire to prevent the chicks from escaping. The pen should be large enough to allow .09 to .19 square metres (1– 2 square feet) per bird. Herd the chicks back into the house late each afternoon. Continue to turn the heat on each afternoon. Discontinue operating your heat lamp during the day once the chicks spend each day outside. Continue to turn the heat on each night until they are 3-4 weeks old (depending on how cold it is outside).

4 weeks and beyond:

- After the birds are 4-5 weeks old, they will need a bigger pen. On our farm we allow 2.3 square metres (25 square feet) per bird (with peepers) in our covered pens. You should always be on the lookout for cannibalism. The first evidence you will see will be blood on the wing tips and tails of some of the smaller birds. Don't expect it to just go away - instead, it will just get worse. Add branches and alfalfa hay to the pen for the birds to peck at and play on - this will help. You may have to trim the top beaks on your birds to curtail the problem. A pair of fingernail clippers will do - trim far enough back just so it bleeds a little. This can be done as early as 2 weeks old and may have to be repeated;
- After the birds are 6 weeks they can be fed a 20% protein grower feed. We recommend that you continue to use Amprolium in their feed until the birds are mature.

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Ongoing Care

1. Move quietly and smoothly when working around the pheasants so as not to startle them.
2. Leave the chick guard up continually for the first three days (four days if there is bad weather).
3. On the fourth or fifth day, take the guard down during the day and put it up each night.
4. On the sixth day, remove the guard entirely.
5. Remove the litter cloth at the end of the fifth day. If it becomes soiled before this time, turn it over so the chicks can use the clean side.
6. Inspect the chicks often during the first week, particularly at night, to make sure they are comfortable not too hot or cold.
7. After the first week, raise the heat lamp 5 to 8 centimetres (2 to 3 inches) to reduce the temperature. Let the chicks circle under the lamp be your guide.
8. Temperature at floor level should be about 32°C (90°F) in the second week.
9. At the end of the third week, discontinue the heat during the day, weather permitting, and turn it on again in early evening. Leave the heat on if it is cold or wet.
10. By the end of the fourth week, weather permitting; you should be able to discontinue the heat entirely.
11. Allow some ventilation in the brooder house but ensure no drafts blow directly on the young pheasants.

Feed

PLEASE DO NOT USE CHICKEN FEED, AS THE PROTEIN LEVEL IS INADEQUATE FOR PHEASANTS. If you cannot easily access Pheasant Feed, choose an alternate high protein quality manufactured feed, such as Turkey feed.

- For example, feed Turkey Starter (25% to 28% protein) for 0 to 6 weeks of age and Turkey Grower (22% to 23% protein) for 7 to 11 or 12 weeks of age.
- Feed is usually medicated with Emtryl to control a turkey disease called Blackhead.
 - Pheasant chicks eat about 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) each of Turkey Starter in 6 weeks (therefore 25 chicks will eat 25 kilograms).
 - 25 kilograms (55 pounds) of Turkey Grower should last 25 chicks about 4 weeks.

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- After 11 weeks the chicks will start to eat whole, or milled grains (wheat, oats, corn, barley, and canola), but this should be mixed with a turkey supplement to be about 17% protein.;
 - The chicks will eat 3 kilograms (6.6 pounds) each between 11 and 14 weeks old.
- After 14 weeks of age, the pheasants can be fed whole grains and a mixture of Breeder supplement (17%). Grain (whole, not rolled) should be added to the feed as the birds get older. Corn cobs and flax may also be used;
 - They will eat approximately 6 kilograms (13 pounds) each.

Potential Cost of food, available through UFA, or other feed stores.

- Turkey Starter: 25% protein, 0-6 weeks, 2015 prices - \$20/25kg bag;
- Turkey Grower: 22% protein, 7-12 weeks, 2015 prices - \$18.25/25kg bag; and
- In 2015, the average cost of feeding a pheasant during the program was \$2.68/bird. (This cost is based on no grain added to the feed once the birds were approximately 4 weeks old).

Feeding

- For the first five days, feed the chicks their Pheasant or Turkey Starter crumbled on rough paper plates;
- Two plates should be enough for 50 chicks;
- If you buy paper plates, use the coloured ones; the colour attracts the chicks to the feed. Use the paper plates with the rough surfaces that are not waxed;
- Make certain there is feed on the plates for the birds at all times;
- Remove litter from plates and feeders before refilling to prevent the spread of disease;
- On the third day, remove one plate and replace it with a small chick size feeder filled with Turkey Starter inside the guard;
- After the sixth day, the chicks can feed from the feeders and the plates can be removed;
- The feeder in the enclosed run should be moved at least once a week to prevent disease.

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Grit

- Grit is used to help maintain normal gizzards, which in turn helps keep gamebirds healthy and strong.
- You should use insoluble grit along with the oats as this will aid the gizzard in remaining normal.
- About 2.5 kilograms (5.5 pounds) of chick size granite grit should be enough for 50 Pheasants through to 12 weeks of age.
- Sprinkle a small amount of chick size granite grit over the feed on the first day and every third day following. The shiny particles also help attract chicks to the feed.
- **Do not use too much grit**, as the chicks may go on a grit binge and not eat enough food.

Watering

- For the first three days, give the chicks water at room temperature 20°C (68°F).
- After the third day, they can drink cold water.
- Put small stones or marbles in the chicks water founts for the first six days, to keep the chicks from falling in the water and getting chilled or drowning.
- Put a waterer on each side of the heat lamp so the chicks have water close by.
- Clean water founts every day and change the water daily.
 - Chicks like water free of litter and dirt.
 - Diseases can be spread quickly through dirty waterers.
 - The water should be moved at least twice weekly in the enclosed run.

You can add terramycin soluble powder (an antibiotic) to their water for the first week, but we do not recommend using an antibiotic unless the chicks are sick or dying.



Peepers, Blinders or Beak Bits

One of the biggest issues that any pheasant farmer comes up against is bird injury caused by pecking each other. Pecking harms the bird, lowers the quality and increases the death rate of birds. The easiest way to prevent this is by ensuring that birds have **enough space and cover within their pen**. However, this isn't always enough. You can also use a blinder, designed for game birds, called a **peeper**.

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What do peepers do?

- Peepers prevent pheasants from seeing what is directly in front of them, which in turn reduces the chances of pecking each other.

When?

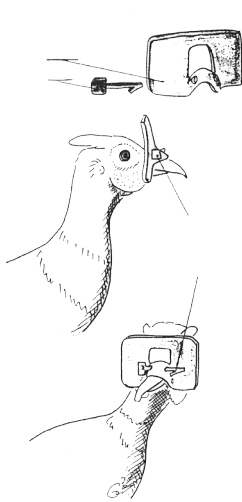
- The best time to put peepers on birds is at approximately 4 to 6 weeks of age when they are placed in outside pens.

Why?

- One of the benefits of using peepers is how humane they are. It prevents birds from harming each other and allows them to drink and feed as well. They just can't see other Pheasants clearly

How to attach peepers:

Use 2 people to put them on the pheasants. One holds the body and the head, the other quickly runs the pin through the nostril ensuring it's secure. **YOU MUST REMOVE peepers before releasing the birds.**



At 4 – 6 weeks the birds should have peepers/ blinders placed on them.



Push pin through the nostril membrane until locked.



Keep in mind that if you choose to use peepers they must be removed before you release your pheasants into the wild.

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Habitat Selection

A pheasant requires many things in their habitat such as...

- Food
- A roost (a place for them to sleep)
- A place to hide (many places)
- A way to stay warm.
- A place to relax (hang out)
- A place to hide a nest
- A place to raise chicks

It is also important to consider

- Landscape and habitat diversity
- Pheasants generally travel less than 3.2 kilometres (2 miles)
- Picking areas that have worked well in the past for pheasant release areas

What should you look for?

- Pheasant habitat needs change with the season so a large variety in the habitat and cover will contribute to success in living in the wild.
- Grass and shrub cover approximately 50cm or 20 inches tall.
 - Pheasants will often roost overnight in this taller cover and use it to avoid detection by predators.
- Broad leaf plants that attract a variety of insects, which are important sources of high protein food for chicks and hens.
- Large patches of thermal cover to keep them warm during the winter.
 - Cattail marshes at least 50 meters (165 feet) across usually work the best for this
 - Areas of shrub or bushes such as snowberry, wild rose, chokecherry and Saskatoon berries
 - Any well designed shelterbelt

A pheasant's habitat requirements change with the seasons. Generally, areas with a greater variety of habitat types available in close proximity to the home range can improve the chance of survival.

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If a pheasant has access to all the appropriate habitat types for all seasons of the year, it will generally travel less than 2 miles. If you select release sites with good access to all habitat types it will be very likely you should be able to see the birds again!

Releasing Your Pheasants

Once ACA determines the locations and release dates, 4-H members will be responsible for providing the pheasants to ACA for release in specific areas or releasing the pheasants at specifically identified suitable sites within a set time frame, approximately late August or early September. The locations and release dates will be determined by the Alberta Conservation Association and communicated to the clubs and members by the 4-H Branch. Remember, you may be able to release some pheasants into suitable habitat areas that **you** identify, if agreeable to the Alberta Conservation Association.

ALL Release Locations will be recorded by the club leader on the tally form and submitted (as indicated on the form) to the 4-H Branch to be shared with the Alberta Conservation Association. Record the legal land description, township and range road intersection or GPS coordinates. Please be as descriptive as possible. This information will be used for ongoing research purposes.

Capturing the birds within your flight pen is tricky. The birds are wild and frighten very easily. To assist your efforts, try using a rubber fishnet to capture the birds, as this will not damage their feathers.

Containers used to transport birds to release sites should not be too tall (ie. Large dog crates) as the birds may panic and hit their heads on the roof, doing damage to themselves or other birds in the cage. Use a special wild bird crate, available to borrow from the ACA, or a low profile box that is not too much higher than the height of a bird. Do not overcrowd the birds in the crate.

Release Day



Transport the pheasants safely and carefully to a suitable release habitat area. Note the bird crate in the left hand photo.

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The Life Cycle of a Pheasant in the Wild

You may wonder what is in store for your pheasants when they do not have you to depend on for their care. Consider pheasants of the same age as those that you are releasing in late August/September.



Fall – September to November = Growth and Survival

Fall is about survival and growth for the upcoming winter! For wild pheasants, their survival often depends on easy access to food so that they may add to and maintain their winter weight. Roosters have spent all summer feeding and gaining weight to prepare themselves.

Meanwhile the hens will have had a hectic summer raising young, incubating them, teaching them to forage in the brood cover plus trying to keep them protected in the grass to evade predators. So hens are behind the roosters in their development and they have to start gaining weight in the fall to survive the winter.

But...

Now the colorful roosters must evade hunters. So their days of basking in the sun, ruffling their feathers, are gone! The camouflaged brown hens get a chance to forage and catch back up in their development. Also the less roosters that make it through hunting means less competition for hens to obtain their own food.



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Winter – December to March = Survival

Winter is the hardest time of the year to be a pheasant. They aren't concerned about anything but trying to survive. They need a source of thermal cover that will keep them warm throughout the winter.

Different habitat types provide different insulation, similar to the insulation in a house.

The highest insulation value can be found in:

1. Cattail marsh
2. Shrubbery or brush cover
3. Well-designed man-made shelterbelt
4. Linear shelterbelt
5. Windswept field



Alberta winters can be really hard on pheasants. Good thermal cover areas like big cattail marshes give pheasants the best chance of survival. Well constructed shelter belts also offer good insulation and predator avoidance. Poorly designed shelter belts offer limited thermal cover. Wind-blown fields can be a food source for pheasants but offer little thermal value. High energy food like cereal crops, corn or sugarbeets provide great overwintering food for pheasants but it is best if an area of cover is closeby. Leaving a little bit of food in close proximity to winter cover really helps pheasants and other upland game birds to survive.

Spring – April to May = Reproduction

In spring pheasants are thinking about reproduction. The habitat requirements change. Roosters will claim a territory and crow to attract available females. Hens look for big fields with thick standing grass to tuck their nests behind. Hens will lay between 10-12 eggs for a period of 23 days.

Good thermal cover is required for the nest because cold, wet weather can delay egg development and if nests are not hidden well enough, it leaves them open to predation. Grass over 50cm (20 inches) tall provides structural cover for nesting pheasants and protection from predators.

Summer – June to August = Brood Rearing

Summer is all about the chicks! Pheasants begin raising their young chicks that are often called broods. Peak pheasant hatch occurs in June and the new chicks or broods need insects to survive. Insects provide approximately 90% of their diet which is much needed protein. Protein is very important in this early stage of life, which is provided by high protein rations for pheasant chicks raised in captivity. Good cover for raising a brood has plants that attract an abundance of insects for food. Good insect attractants are flowering crops like alfalfa, sainfoin or clover crops. A field with lots of wild flowers helps provide the chicks with the insects they need to survive and develop.

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Avian Influenza or “Bird Flu”

What is Avian Influenza?

- A virus that causes severe illness or death in birds that is occasionally carried by ducks and geese;

Is Avian Influenza harmful to humans?

- Cases of human infection are extremely rare; and
- The only known Canadian case was in a traveller from China.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- There has not been a known Pheasant case so it is difficult to know what the signs and symptoms will be exactly. You are encouraged to use common sense to judge whether your birds are healthy or not;
- In other species, infected birds will wander around in a stupor, feathers are in poor shape (not from pecking), there is swelling around the body, and the birds will be getting picked on by others; and
- Deaths are normal and expected when a bird gets this disease, especially in the first two weeks of catching it.

How do you prevent it?

- Keep your birds away from waterfowl (large aquatic birds)
- Don't feed your birds while wearing shoes or boots that were just in a wetland
- Use clean, fresh water from a well or canal. (Moving water)

If you do suspect Bird Flu....

- Put any suspicious loss (after the first two weeks of growth) into a garbage bag **using gloves** and put it into a freezer; and
- Report your loss to ACA **as soon as possible**. They will conduct an investigation.

Common Problems

Should you have trouble with a specific problem please do not hesitate to contact the staff at the Alberta Conservation Association for help, by phone, email or via the Facebook group page.

Most of the problems you will encounter with your pheasants can be solved with common sense. One major point to keep in mind at all times is that you are working with wild birds, and as such, they require additional care and extra caution.

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1. **Issue:** Loss of tail feathers and/or blood on the tail end of pheasants

Cause: This problem is caused from pecking or cannibalism in the group of pheasants. This practice can result from poor cover conditions in the pen, overcrowding or boredom. Depending on the condition of the pen, cannibalism usually starts between three to six weeks of age and may last up to eight weeks of age.

Solution: The best solution is to eliminate the cause. Good cover may be obtained by planting canola, corn, oats, and etc. in the pen first thing in the spring. By adding brush piles to the pen and placing stooks formed from green feed, cover can be improved. If hung in the pen the stooks also give the birds something at which to peck and pull at, thus eliminating boredom. Allotment of sufficient pen space insures that overcrowding won't be a problem.

Ongoing treatment: When a bird is injured, remove it and place it in a small hospital pen supplied with food, water and cover. Once the bird recovers, if fairly mature, release it prematurely to the wild. If, however, the bird is too young (less than six weeks) place the pheasant back in the pen and watch it closely. If the pecking occurs again you have no choice but to release the pheasant into the wild. If you do not release the pheasant, severe cannibalism can result in its death. Cannibalism may be the major problem facing you; the best remedy is to allow sufficient pen space and good cover. Cannibalism is hard to control once started.

2. **Issue:** Pheasants disappearing from brooder house or pen.

Cause: Pheasant chicks are very agile and fly at 10 days of age. Their wild nature results in endless attempts at escaping from their pen or brooder house. Holes in pens, cracks in walls and unscreened air vents all provide a mode of escape for the ever-persistent pheasant chick. Any hole more than 3.5 centimeters (1.4 inches) in diameter provides a path to freedom for the young pheasant.

If the rearing area is free from small holes and cracks, there can only be one answer, a predator is removing the pheasants. In most cases, the predator is domestic; it could be in the form of a cat or a dog, however, the mink, weasel, skunk or owl are all opportunists and will not pass up the chance to prey upon a pheasant in the pen.

Predators usually leave signs of their work; feathers, blood and evidence of digging or burrowing are all clues to the act that occurred. Be sure your control methods are directed toward the guilty party and not harming innocent or protected animals and birds. Remember that hawks, owls, and falcons are protected because they do a lot of good in the control of rodents and other pests. Do not shoot these birds. Call your nearest wildlife officer if you need help.

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3. **Issue:** Pheasants die in large numbers in the corner of brooder house.

Cause: This is common during the first week or two and occurs in the late evening or night after the chick guard has been removed. The birds huddle in the corner for warmth; first a couple of birds together, then a half dozen, soon a dozen and before long, 25 or 50. The birds literally pile up. The end result is that the birds on the bottom are suffocated.

Solution: The solution to this problem is to eliminate the corners in the brooder house. This can be done by angling plywood or metal across the corners so there are no right angles. Be sure that young pheasants cannot get behind a corner chick guard as they may become chilled.

4. **Issue:** Pheasant is listless, huddles near the ground, and the feathers are ruffled.

Cause: This may be a sign of a chilled bird, and if allowed to persist, may develop into sickness. Chilling usually occurs in the younger birds and is a result of being away from the brooder house and/or heat lamp.

Solution: The bird affected by chilling should be placed under the heat lamp with food and water readily available. If the condition of the bird does not improve in a few days, the bird should be removed and sent to the nearest veterinary laboratory for examination.

The best cure for this problem is to ensure that the brooding area and house are free of drafts. If the birds are less than four weeks of age, be sure to drive them back into the brooder house during cold, wet weather.

5. **Issue:** Pheasant droppings are loose and/or of abnormal color.

Cause: A variety of factors can affect the feces of pheasants such as a change in food, chilling or some form of sickness. The best thing to do is watch your birds and keep track of how widespread and persistent the problem is.

Solution: Ensure that old feed is cleaned up and feeders and waterers are clean. Most disease problems can be avoided by maintaining sanitary conditions. If the problem is in the food (i.e. change of feed, or picking up some old feed on the ground), the bird will probably return to normal in a few days. However, if the problem persists and the birds condition degenerates, contact the Alberta Conservation Association for some advice.

6. **Issue:** Pheasants failing to feather out properly.

Cause: If the pheasants are allowed to remain inside the brooder house too long, proper feather development does not take place. Cooler temperatures help stimulate feather production; the warmth of the brooder house delays feather growth. This problem usually occurs between five and six weeks of age.

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Solution: Ensure that your brooder house is well ventilated. After six weeks of age, do not allow the pheasants back into the brooder house. This forces them to make use of the outside shelters you have provided for them (e.g. brush piles, lean-tos, etc.)

- 7. Issue:** Pheasants feathers on the top of their head are ruffled and missing; there may be some bleeding.

Cause: This is normally caused by the absence of the 45-centimeter (18 inches) guard board around the base of the pen. The pheasants, because of their nervous nature, are constantly bumping and banging their heads against the wire. Often the birds get their heads through the wire mesh and scrape the top of their heads. In severe cases, when bleeding occurs, this may promote cannibalism, as the other birds will peck at the bloodied area.

Solution: This problem is easily solved by ensuring that the guard board is intact. If some cannibalism occurs, follow the suggestions for cannibalism.

- 8. Issue:** Pheasant appears to be smaller, weaker and of poor appearance in comparison with other pheasants. This condition lasts for several days or weeks.

Cause: The pheasant or pheasants in question have probably contracted some form of sickness. This condition can be caused by a number of things, which require a professional to diagnose accurately

Solution: Be sure the highest standard of cleanliness is maintained in regards to yourself and the birds as most sickness results from poor sanitary conditions. However, even the most sanitary of pens can become infected by outside sources (mice, etc.).

Contact the Alberta Conservation Association or local veterinarian for assistance. The sick should be removed from the pen and sent in for examination. Watch the remaining pheasants closely to ensure they do not contract the same sickness.

- 9. Issue:** Pheasants are healthy, but have abnormal physical appearance.

Cause: This problem may take several days or weeks to show up. Examples of physical abnormalities may be a crooked neck or deformed feet. These may be hereditary or as a result of abnormal hatching conditions.

Solution: There is nothing that can be done for these birds. If the problem worsens with time, these birds should be destroyed. These birds have a very difficult time in the wild, and once released, almost certainly become subject to predation. The kindest thing to do for these birds is to dispose of them at an early date.

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Pheasant Raising Chart

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	2 nd wk.	3 rd wk.	4 th wk.	5 th wk.	6-12 wk.	12 wk.
Brooding													
• Keep guard around brooder	X	X	X		X								
• Remove guard in day, replace at night				X									
• Remove guard entirely						X							
• Use litter cloth	X	X	X	X									
• Keep brooder lamp at proper height to ensure proper brooding temperatures	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
• Brooder left on day and night	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
• Brooder off in day, on at night										X			
• Brooder off											X		
Feeding													
• Have proper feed in feeders all the time. Clean and refill daily. Put feed on rough paper plates	X	X	X	X	X	X							
• Add chick grower to starter													
• Mix grit with feed										X			
• Have feeders in house and enclosed run	X			X			X	X	X	X	X	X	
• Have feeders in flight pen													
• Add cracked grain to flight pen								X					
• Add cracked grain to grower													X
Watering													
• Clean and refill founts daily. Give chicks warm water. (cold is alright after third day)	X												
• Have small stones or marbles in base of founts	X	X	X										
• Have founts in house and enclosed run		X	X	X	X	X	X						
• Have founts in flight pen								X	X	X	X	X	X
Ranging													
• Keep chicks in brooder house	X	X	X	X	X	X	X						
• Let chick in yard if warm and dry								X					
• Drive chicks into house at night, let out in day								X	X				
• Give chicks free run of house and enclosed run both day and night										X			
• Let chicks into flight pen ; close house.											X	X	X
• Release												X	X

